

One late spring afternoon 20-odd years ago, Southwest Airlines landed a flight of passengers from San Francisco in a rain-dust combo storm common to the shortgrass country. Mud drops splattered on the plane windows like spit wads. The record of my seat assignment lasted for days after the landing from clutching the boarding pass so tight that the numeral stamped my hand.

Must have been longer ago, as we braved the storm walking to the terminal instead of being unloaded at a gate. Folks dressed in the tropical fashion of the Coast balked, hoping for a weather break. The rest of us, Texas or New Mexico citizens, bailed on into the fierce winds and pelting rain, accepting a May Day welcome home.

All efforts are wasted trying to make our weather funny. The trite script and the same pattern over and over prevent success. ("In my opinion" is omitted. All my stuff is opinionated, prejudiced, slanted copy ... every word of it.) Don't try, "Wal, if you don't like Texas weather, stay around 10 minutes and it'll change." The old saw might have floated on a dull afternoon in a barroom, but that was years ago.

The problem is not for lack of material. The last drouth lasted long enough for a college sophomore to compose an Odyssey that'd make old Homer think he was traveling on an excursion fare. Any scribe with a laptop, or so much as a ballpoint should be motivated in the midst of a cataclysmic event of such penetrating destruction by dehydration of man, beast and flora. Needed to be either dumbstruck or word blocked to stay off the page while the scorching of the earth by lava and searing of the soil by falling meteors seemed like static on a battery-powered radio compared to the stricken rangelands.

One trouble is that weather forecasters predict the rain in percentages and not in whole numbers. Farther than man can see, hear or chart, nature boils up a tumultuous behavior that makes percentage points appear as sensible as trying to stiff-arm your way out of a storm.

The last day of calf marking, the San Angelo weather station predicted 50 percent precipitation. Moisture started falling just as cows were separated from the calves. Big drops fell, for sure composed of more than 50 percent water, especially the ones dripping off our hat brims and draining down the backs of our shirts.

To make it more tedious, the headgate failed to catch the first calf because of a missing top spring. Luck was

with us however; we found the two-inch spring in six inches of hay in the pickup bed.

Back in operation, the wet track made pushing the calves to the chute slower. Where I was helping a young cowboy bring the calves, the raindrops began to wet 100 percent of the ground and soak 86 percent our chaps, leaving seven percent of the leather dry under each pocket flap.

Became so slick tripping the calf chute that the operator slid underneath a tilted calf from lack of dry footing. Looked bad from the back of the pen. Working in too big of a hurry injures lots of livestock, and delay is costly when men start stumbling on the ground, or a horse bucks at a critical time in a aerial episode. (Be reminded it's okay to make fun of men falling or being bucked off, but the incriminating sign of a dude is a man laughing when a horse falls with his rider.)

After the fall, the markers and chute man slowed until the kid and I were able to stay ahead. He stood out in the open in a yellow slicker, well protected. I found an eight-inch tipped corral post to use as a shield from the driving rain. The post, an old railroad tie, offered about four inches of protection. Found myself staring into space, remembering the Big Boss leading bands of horsemen into

weather that'd qualify for a Hollywood version of a typhoon.

Sure took a long time to mark a hundred head of calves. We work so much in dust, we don't think ahead of time how slick leather soled boots are on wet grass. Escapes us what a shock it is to an old pony for a man to come bogging up with a red plastic poncho whipping the wind, about as subtle as launching the Goodyear tire company's dirigible.

Not much a boss can say when faced with finishing a work in a cold rain. May help to pick on or blame the weather forecasters. Best, I suppose, is to be sure and keep history off the slate. After you have caused everyone to be wet and cold, recounting the flood of 1959 isn't going to relieve the chill ...